



CITY OF
ST. CATHARINES

Corporate Report

Report from Planning and Development Services, Planning Services

Date of Report: May 27, 2013

Date of Meeting: July 22, 2013

Report Number: PDS-155-2013

File: 68.45.130

Subject: Temporary Partial Closure of James Street for Civic Square Pilot Project

Recommendation

That City Council authorize the temporary closure of James Street from the old Courthouse southerly to King Street from August 1 to November 1, 2013 for the purpose of installing a “pilot” civic square outdoor seating area and amenity space; and

That the City Clerk be directed to provide the necessary notice of this proposed temporary road closure, pursuant to By-law 2007-310; and

That staff report back to Council after the “pilot” has concluded on observations, its impacts, public comments and long term recommendations; and

That the City Solicitor be directed to prepare the necessary by-law.

Summary

This report provides an overview of a proposal from the Downtown Development and Revitalization Committee to create a new seasonal outdoor seating area and amenity space on James Street between the old Courthouse and King Street. This installation would serve as a first step towards the eventual creation of a new civic square.

Background

The City’s Creative Cluster Master Plan recommended the creation of a new civic square. The Downtown Development and Revitalization Committee (DDRC) has identified James Street and Market Square as their preferred location for a new civic square and at its meeting of February 21, 2013, established a Civic Square Subcommittee for the purpose of planning and promoting the creation of this civic space. This report describes a phased approach to civic square implementation, as endorsed by the Subcommittee at their meeting of May 7, 2013 and subsequently amended on June 5, 2013 and with staff recommendations which offers slight modifications to the DDRC’s recommendation.

Report

As an advisory committee to Council, the DDRC is tasked with promoting the continued revitalization of downtown St. Catharines through the pursuit of key initiatives that will act as catalysts for Downtown revitalization. The DDRC has identified continued improvement in the public realm as a key priority, including the creation and improvement of outdoor gathering spaces as a means to promote social and economic vitality. Specifically, the Committee has identified, as a priority, the need for a civic square as a large flexible gathering space in downtown St Catharines.

Temporary Closure of James Street

Initially, the DDRC had recommended the use of a number of parking spaces on Market Square as a temporary patio for the summer of 2013. After continued discussion, an amended motion was passed at its meeting on June 5, 2013 “that staff report back to Senior Staff and Council proposing that James Street be altered from Church Street to King Street.” Ideally, the DDRC envisions the temporary closure of this entire area as the pilot civic square. However, to continue to provide practical vehicular access into Market Square for safety and emergency purposes, it is recommended that the first installation proposed for the civic square be that portion of James Street adjacent to the old Courthouse to the King Street and that this stretch of street be closed on a temporary basis from August 1, 2013 to November 2013.

James Street and the parking lots around Market Square was identified as the preferred location for a civic square because of its central location and programming partnership opportunities with the Market, Library and old Courthouse users. The civic square can also serve to connect these facilities, along with City Hall, as one connected civic precinct. The square could be designed to host an outdoor skating rink, as a venue for summer concerts and festivals, as an expanded farmers’ market, or a range of other uses. A detailed design plan will ultimately need to be developed in consultation with the community to determine an ultimate build-out, budget and strategy for the square.

The DDRC acknowledges that the detailed civic square design and community consultation process will take time, and that there is not currently any budget or Council commitment to undertake civic square related works. The proposal described in this report is intended as a first step to build momentum towards a more comprehensive strategy and an ultimate civic square build-out.

As the design, funding and construction of a full civic square will likely take years, the DDRC is recommending that a phased initiative be introduced in the interim.

This portion of James Street is part of an area identified as a civic square shown on the Downtown District Plan of the Garden City Plan (GCP). According to the GCP the eventual square “should be designed as a connected campus format and to support a major gathering place to accommodate a variety of cultural activities, expression and functions and public art.” It is noted that the GCP supports the closing of James Street between St Paul and Church Street to facilitate a major pedestrian public realm spine connecting major activity centres in the Downtown. The proposed temporary closing of

a small portion of the James Street will help test the potential feasibility of implementing this policy in the long term.

This pilot project will allow designers to test usage opportunities, while creating more vibrant pockets within the civic square vicinity and continually build momentum towards an ultimate design and build-out. While a detailed design has not yet been completed it is anticipated that planters will be placed on both ends of the street closure as barriers to vehicular traffic. Coupled with planters and outdoor street furniture such as tables and umbrellas, seating and other furnishings would create a comfortable outdoor room for the downtown community and patrons and act as a visual and functional extension of the old Courthouse space towards the James Street frontage of Gord's Place and Tim Hortons. The space also could be used potentially for expansion by Market vendors and as an improved venue for the existing concert series. In addition, the owners of Gord's Place and Tim Hortons are interested in partnering with the City on the design of this area which may include the creation of patio space. Detailed design will be undertaken by members of the Civic Square Subcommittee and the City's Green Committee in consultation with staff. For illustration purposes, photos of a similar initiative in Philadelphia are included as Appendix 1.

The installation is planned to be in place at the beginning of August, 2013. This area would remain in place for the remainder of the summer and early falls. By November 1, 2013, the installation will be removed, and the area will revert back to James Street. Depending on the success of the trial, the installation could be redeployed, altered and/or relocated for next summer. Operationally, Transportation and Environmental Services staff will be responsible for garbage removal, planter watering and general maintenance. Fire and Emergency Management Services have reviewed the proposal and offer no objections. St. Catharines Transit has indicated that this proposal affects only one route which can be easily mitigated for the temporary period.

Public Comment

Essentially, the proposed closure of this portion of James Street will be a pilot for how an eventual civic square could operate and function. Public comment on this test case will be solicited and welcome and will begin the conversation about the form and function of an ultimate civic square in Downtown St Catharines. The project will be monitored and evaluated and staff will report back to Council on the results.

Financial Implications

The St. Catharines Green Committee has committed \$5,000 towards the project.

The Regional Municipality of Niagara is considering matching these funds through their Smarter Niagara grants program for public realm improvements.

There will be operational costs associated with the physical set up of the road closure. This work will include but not be limited to barricades, road signage, picnic tables, garbage cans and additional on-going litter pick-up. The estimated cost of this work is approximately \$2,500 and this cost will be accommodated with the Operating Budget.

No additional funds are requested of Council for this project at this time.

Revenue from the five parking spaces located on this stretch of James Street will be lost only during the period when this portion of James Street is closed. Staff anticipate that the impact on the parking supply will be minimal because of the close proximity of the Carlisle Parking Garage. Financial Management Services advises that the potential revenue loss is estimated to be about \$2340 for the trial period from August through to November 1, 2013.

Conclusion

The temporary road closure and installation of community space represents an immediate opportunity to create a new outdoor gathering place in the downtown while serving as a first step towards the ultimate creation of a civic square. The temporary nature of the design will allow “the patio” to be modified, redeployed or removed as needed and without permanent alteration to the underlying parking spaces.

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Appendix 1

Sample Photos of a Philadelphia Project Similar Proposed Temporary Patio Space

